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Inuit communities can beat COVID-19 and tuberculosis

Inuit communities are at high risk for respiratory infections and coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) because they are currently fighting another respiratory infection epidemic, tuberculosis. Inuit today are nearly 300 times more likely to get tuberculosis than any Canadian born, non-indigenous person.¹

COVID-19 has been reported in Inuit communities in Nunavik, Canada; however, no case of COVID-19 disease has been reported in Nunavut, Canada.² But there is no room for complacency. In Clyde River, Nunavut, the community is already implementing emergency readiness plans for the control of COVID-19.³

Communities in this area are reachable only by air, have very basic medical care facilities, and have insufficient COVID-19 testing available. If the virus that causes COVID-19 reaches Nunavut, it could have tragic consequences.

Defeating infectious diseases requires community-driven responses. Community leadership together with a coordinated public health approach are needed to eliminate tuberculosis in Nunavut. We need the same response for COVID-19. WHO has recognised the need for community-driven responses and encourages implementation of innovative people-centred approaches to tuberculosis during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴

Community organisations, such as Ilisaksivik Society and SeeChange Initiative, have developed a unique collaborative model:⁵ a fundamentally community-first approach that provides control, space, and resources for community members to empower themselves to eliminate tuberculosis. It can do the same for COVID-19.

The model includes the development of emergency readiness plans (eg, sourcing hygiene materials for the

community), the creation of radio and online platforms to share culturally appropriate material on COVID-19, the training of community members to share relevant health-care tasks (eg, telemedicine); and the promotion of surveys and mask wearing.

Equipped with culturally appropriate information and ownership of the resources needed to tackle COVID-19 and tuberculosis, Inuit communities can protect and prepare their members.

Clyde River and other communities are leading the way in Nunavut. Elsewhere, communities that are given adequate resources and implement prevention and treatment strategies can win the fight against COVID-19 and tuberculosis.

We declare no competing interests.

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- 2 CBC News. Nunavik-wide curfew in effect after first case of COVID-19. March 29, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/nunavik-wide-curfew-in-effect-tonight-covid-1.5514197> (accessed April 1, 2020).
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- 4 WHO. Information note: tuberculosis and COVID-19. April 4, 2020. https://www.who.int/tb/COVID_19considerations_tuberculosis_services.pdf (accessed April 1, 2020).
- 5 See Change Initiative. We can pass the flame: a community first approach to tuberculosis elimination in Nunavut. <https://www.seechangeinitiative.org/tbproject> (accessed April 6, 2020).



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